

The manipulation of religion in Nigeria, 1977-1987, Yusufu Bala Usman (Zaria: Yusufu Bala Usman Institute, 2020), 166 pp. ISBN-978-978-2557-08-7, Price: N1,500 (\$3.60)

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A wit once claimed for Nigeria the distinction of being 'God's own' country. In a similar vein, Nigerians were recently adjudged as the most 'religious' people in the world. Ironically however, this puritan 'image' contrasts sharply with the popular persona embodied in the Nigerian 'factor'-a euphemism for the incompetence, arm-twisting, graft and other corrupt practices, as well as the circumvention of due process for which Nigerians have come to be known in the last four decades. The book, *The Manipulation of Religion in Nigeria* first published in 1987 and re-issued to the public in 2020 is authored by the late radical historian at the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Yusufu Bala Usman. The book is an exposé, as well as an indictment of the Nigerian elites' proclivity to make capital of religion in the achievement of their primordial selfish interests.

When it was published, the book hits on the raw nerves of the religious orthodoxy and the conservative elements of the Nigerian society alike, becoming instantly controversial. In an opening salvo, the author charges that, 'The real basis of the manipulation of religion in Nigerians today is the need to obscure from the people of Nigeria a fundamental aspect of our reality: that is the domination of our political economy by a class of intermediaries who are being increasingly exposed...this is to enable this class to cover themselves with religious and ethnic disguises in order to further entrench division among our people, slow down their awakening, at any cost; even the unity of our country, for which so much has been sacrificed' (p. 15).

Employing statistics, the author enumerated proved instances of the manipulation of religion by the Nigerian elites, adherents to either Islam, or Christianity. One of the notable examples being the case of the owners of the Metal Box Company; Mr. Silas Daniyan and Alhaji Shehu Malami, whose accounts when published in the papers point to the fact that they compete in Metal Box to obtain scarce resources for the ethno-religious communities their names ascribe to them (p. 11). The author adds that, 'far from competing, every evidence indicates in playing their role of "local nationals", as Sir Alex Page, the chairman of the mother Metal Box company in Britain, calls them' (p. 11). Like a prosecutor presenting a case before a jury, Usman marshals his evidence although with the consummate skills of a great historian that he was.

Organized in seven chapters, the book is a collection of ideas and ideals of the radical socio-political and economic reforms, which are at the core of the author's advocacy and activism towards the liberation of Nigeria, a theme, which runs through all his works on social criticism, as well as in some of his other contemporary writings on politics and political economy¹.

The book further exposes the religious manipulation of popular imagination by the ruling class so as to protect their interest, especially, by influencing public policy. Citing the assassination of the former Nigerian Head of State, Murtala Muhammed, the implacable *Shari'ah* debate, and the instigating speech of Chike Obi at the 1976 National Union of Nigerian Students Convention, the author explains how these events paved the way for religious

¹ For details on this see; Y.B., Usman, *For the Liberation of Nigeria* (Zaria: Yusufu Bala Usman Institute, 2019) and Y.B.,

Usman, *Nigeria against the IMF: The Home Market Strategy* (Zaria: Yusufu Bala Usman Institute, 2019).

bigotry, inter-ethnic rivalries, and disunity among Nigerians. This he avers, was as a result of the handiwork of the intermediary bourgeoisie class serving a direct link between the people and the national wealth on one hand and between the country and the world capitalist system on the other (pp. 2-14).

While commenting on national unity and cohesion, the author identifies Nigeria as a sectarian capitalist state that rewards its people based on their religious, ethnic, or regional inclination. This according to him, further divided Nigerians along those lines and the most dangerous being the problem of indigene/settler constructs. In all this, he believes religion is the most potent smoke-screen employed by the ruling class to further divide the people and divert their attention while they exploit the nation.

The book also debunks the famous, but a mythical trilogy of national unity in Nigeria viz; the myth of historical tribalism, the myth of psychology that projects the superiority of one ethnic group over the other, and the myth of development and management, which attributed to the Nigerian backwardness and national disunity to poor economic and managerial skills, the climax of which is a crisis of governance. To the author, 'the substance of the problem of national unity is located in the domination of the Nigerian state by...parasites whose sole purpose of existence is not to produce or create, but to serve as gatemen, agent and procurers for the multinationals. The contest for this role is all that their policies are about, tribalism and ethnicity are the masks and disguises' (p. 52).

Usman succinctly observes that the 'miscalculated' attempt of the Nigeria government to support French imperial strategy in Africa may likely lead to intra/inter African wars citing the Nigerian collision with Libya as a case study. He equally calls on some international organization such as North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Organization of African Union (OAU) and Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to show the Nigerian state the dangers inherent in its foreign policy that may also promote war between African countries, especially those located in the continents' northern, western and central regions. This alarming danger is also strengthened by some indigenous agents of Western powers in and outside Nigeria among the elites.

The author also examines the way and manner the Nigerian ruling class uses the Nigeria Police Force and other instruments of coercion mainly to muffle political opposition and the freedom of expression. He himself has suffered a series of government victimization and intimidation not only as an intellectual, but also as a member of one of the most radical political parties in the history of Nigeria, Peoples' Redemption Party (PRP),

developed a critical mind against the promotion of tribal and sectarian dichotomies, as well as hatred by the oligarchy, particularly those parading themselves as the representatives of the people of Northern Nigeria. To Usman, even the famous Maitatsine saga of 1982 that started in Kano State and claimed many lives in most Northern States was directly manipulated by those in power to syphon a lot of money under the pretext of national security.

In his development of diverse techniques of historical interpretation, the author explains the nature and dynamics of identity politics, the national question; especially in post-colonial Nigeria. He also argues that without an effort on the side of the Nigerian government to forge and promote national integration most importantly in addressing the tension from the uneasy 'marriage' of 1914 that saw the amalgamation of the country by the colonial administration, which has continued to be a source of recriminations from and amongst various communities in Nigeria. The perception still persists in several quarters in Nigeria that the political and administrative mechanism of the Federation is skewed, hence, the recurrent calls for 'true Federalism' through a restructuring of the political and administrative super structure of the nation. The author interprets these agitations as the result of the abdication of the Nigerian state of the central position it used to occupy as an organ with primary responsibility for the provision of physical infrastructure and services and the withdrawal of the state from its commitment to promoting equitable social and economic development in Nigeria.

On the balance, the book makes for interesting if not always easy reading. It is also at once educative and thought-provoking. One of the outstanding high points of the book is its foresight; in the intervening decades (1987-2020) between the first and second issues of the book, several cases of intra and inter-religious conflicts have been recorded in various parts of the country in addition to as many numbers of interethnic violent conflicts. In a sense, it can be said that the book anticipated this menace against which it issued an early forewarning. Also, the book is at once a critical social commentary, as well as a factual reference document. Yet, a few deficiencies could be discerned which makes for a number of inconsistencies. A very close reading of the book reveals that it was put together from papers presented by the author at various conferences along with correspondences and similar materials, which have not been properly integrated and harmonized to suit a proper presentation to the public as a book². The book also spawns a plethora of conspiracy theories about alleged western cum-Jewish, even Arab machinations on the African and Nigerian societies with little or no citation of evidence to support the claims made in the book.

² An example of this appeared severally one of which is in the first chapter that was initially meant to be a public lecture organized by the Students' Union in 1977 (p. 2).